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AUTHOR Bimber, Bruce
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ABSTRACT

Decentralization has been one of the centerpieces of education reform in the United States over the past decade, yet the results so far are not encouraging. This booklet presents findings of a study that explored the hypothesis that decentralization efforts have failed to relax external constraints on schools or to enable school staffs to make decisions about instructional matters. It analyzes decision making at four high schools with varying degrees of decentralization. The matched case studies examine the ways in which decision making varies under different governance arrangements. The four schools included a centralized, a modestly decentralized, a radically decentralized, and an independent school. Data support the hypothesis that decentralization can fail to significantly change external constraints on schools. The schools' governance structures remained centrally controlled or represented a combination of decentralized and centralized arrangements. Second, decentralization may be flawed to the extent that it assumes that decisions are separable, although actually, linkages among decisions may exist. Third, many features of the governance arrangements tended to insulate the financial and professional interests of the teachers and administrators from one another and from the performance of their schools. In conclusion, decentralization should address the need for comprehensive changes across all interrelated categories of decision making. (LMI)

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The Decentralization Mirage

Comparing Decisionmaking Arrangements in Four High Schools

Bruce Bimber

Institute on Education and Training

EA 026 316

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The Decentralization Mirage

Comparing Decisionmaking Arrangements in Four High Schools

Bruce Bimber

Supported by the George Gund Foundation and the Lilly Endowment Inc.

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PREFACE

This report is based on the proposition that the country's public schools can meet the tremendous challenges facing them, but that doing so will require a thorough rethinking of how schools are governed. The report focuses on decentralization, an idea that is thought to be a key to improving public school performance. It is motivated by the following questions:

- After a decade of decentralizing reforms, what has changed in the way schools are governed?
- What has been learned about governance that can improve future efforts at decentralization?

These questions are addressed by comparing decisionmaking arrangements in four schools with varying degrees of decentralization. The findings should be of interest to school superintendents, board members, teachers and teachers' union heads, principals, and civic leaders concerned with improving the performance of public schools.

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SUMMARY

Decentralization has been one of the centerpieces of education reform in the United States over the past decade. Nearly every major school district has undergone a process of decentralization. This process has been based on the chief assumption of a connection between the structure of institutional arrangements for governing schools and the nature of educational outcomes. Specifically, decentralization is driven by the idea that removing constraints on schools and enabling school staffs to make decisions about instructional matters will produce more effective schools. Site-based management, school-based decisionmaking, school charters, and other variations on the decentralization theme all share the assumption that reducing controls exercised by school boards, central office staffs, and state authorities will prompt school staffs to exert greater initiative and to better tailor instruction to the needs of students.

The movement toward experimentation with the principle of decentralization shows every sign of continuing to accelerate. Yet the results so far are not encouraging. There is little evidence of better student achievement, and few schools calling themselves "decentralized" have made major changes in established educational practices.

Several explanations for why decentralization has not proven more successful have been offered. They include lack of accountability mechanisms in decentralized governance schemes, simple retrenchment, the unwillingness of central offices to share power, the hostility of unions toward the idea, the capacity of education bureaucracies to defend themselves against change, the political impetus for centralized control in urban systems, and the tendency for

decentralization to focus on marginal decisionmaking matters (Hill, 1993; Brown, 1992; Hannaway, 1992; Wohlstetter and Odden, 1992; Wong and Peterson, 1992; David, 1989).

These claims suggest two possibilities regarding decentralization's primary assumption of a connection between governance changes and educational outcomes. It may be that the connection between institutional structure and organizational performance is weak: The assumption that removing constraints will result in more initiative, better instruction, and improved schools is wrong. Or it may be that decentralization efforts are not producing significant changes in institutional structure in the first place: Despite the resources that have been put into decentralization over the past decade, external constraints on schools have not been changed meaningfully. That is, either the organizing principle of decentralization is itself faulty or the implementation of decentralization is so flawed that we cannot know whether that organizing principle works.

This study explores the latter possibility, because it addresses a prior condition for understanding the former possibility. It would be premature to judge the validity of decentralization's chief assumption, as some are beginning to do, until we have a better empirical understanding of the nature of the governance changes that decentralization efforts bring about. This study examines the hypothesis that decentralization fails to produce a meaningful relaxation in external constraints on schools or to enable school staffs to make decisions about instructional matters. The study explores this hypothesis through an analysis of decisionmaking at four high schools with varying degrees of decentralization. These matched case studies examine the ways in which decisionmaking varies under different governance arrangements.

Three main findings were derived from the study:

1. At the schools examined here, the hypothesis that decentralization can fail to make significant changes in external constraints and decisionmaking authority is true. Years after decentralization was introduced, governance structures at three schools either remained centrally controlled or represented a hybrid of centralized and decentralized arrangements.

2. The chief reason for the limited effects of decentralization in this study is the inseparability of decisions. Many classes of decisions sometimes treated as separate subjects of reform are highly interdependent, and this interdependence limited the effectiveness of fragmented attempts to relax constraints on decisionmaking. Linkages among budget, personnel, instructional, and operational decisions mean that authority ostensibly given school staff over one class of decisions has effectively been limited by constraints on other classes of decisions. This effect is likely to be general and may account for problems with decentralization in many schools and school districts. The practice of decentralization may be flawed to the extent that it assumes decisions are separable.

3. At the schools included in this study, many features of governance arrangements tend to insulate the financial and professional interests of teachers and administrators from one another and from the performance of their schools. Insulation may exacerbate risk-aversion, mistrust, and inaction toward problems. This finding also suggests a general problem, and may indicate that decentralization reforms should create structural remedies for divisiveness by joining the interests of all staff in collective success. The goal should be to promote a sense of mutual interest in schools' good performance.

The findings imply that it is too soon to know whether significant governance changes improve schools educationally, but not too soon to see that decentralization efforts can fail to produce meaningful governance changes. To be effective at removing constraints and creating environments in which schools take responsibility for the education process, decentralization should address the need for comprehensive changes across all interrelated categories of decisionmaking.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the many educators who gave of their time and shared their experiences and concerns with me. I also wish to express my appreciation for advice, comments, and assistance to Superintendent John Porter of the Oroville Union High School District, Leslie Eliason of the University of Washington, and RAND colleagues David Adamson, Susan Bodilly, Marian Branch, Thomas Glennan, Paul Hill, Luetta Pope, and Christina Smith.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization has been one of the centerpieces of education reform in the United States over the past decade. In a period of turmoil and pervasive experimentation in public education, few reform concepts have been as ubiquitous as decentralization. Nearly every major school district has undertaken efforts at this type of reform. In some places, such as Kentucky and Oregon, decentralization has been a statewide phenomenon, organized around new state education acts. More often, decentralization has been organized at the district level, particularly in the large urban districts, where approaches have varied widely. Some approaches have focused on creating local education authorities, as happened in Chicago; some have focused on making waivers in school board rules, contract changes, and modifications to state education regulations, as has been the case in Miami. In Los Angeles, an important component of decentralization has been attempts to break the city's huge education system into smaller, independent units.

Although approaches to decentralization differ, all share the chief assumption of a connection between the structure of institutional arrangements for governing schools and the nature of educational outcomes. Specifically, decentralization is driven by the idea that removing constraints on schools and enabling school staffs to make decisions about instructional matters will produce more effective schools. Site-based management, school-based decisionmaking, school charters, and other variations on the decentralization theme all share the assumption that reducing controls exercised by school boards, central office staffs, and state authorities will prompt school

staffs to exert greater initiative and to better tailor instruction to the needs of students.

The decentralization movement shows every sign of continuing to accelerate. Yet the results so far are not encouraging. There is little evidence of better student achievement. Several studies have documented the failure of decentralization efforts to produce the desired improvements in performance. Wohlstetter and Odden (1992) write that site-based management is "everywhere and nowhere," observing that decentralization often does little to change entrenched systems of governance, and they call for the joining of curriculum and instructional reforms with the decentralization of budget and personnel decisionmaking. Hill and Bonan (1991) note that site-based management is often a victim of "projectitus," the tendency for school boards and central offices to "tinker" with schools' administrative systems rather than reshaping the core of the governance structure. Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz (1990) and Clune and White (1988) also report the widespread ineffectiveness of many reforms. Decentralization appears to have become something of a mirage: It is readily visible at a distance and beckons many educators, but is often proving illusory upon closer inspection.

Several explanations for why decentralization has not proven more successful have been offered. Brown (1992) lists lack of accountability, lack of evidence for effectiveness, simple retrenchment, unwillingness of central offices to share power, and the hostility of unions. Hill (1993) observes that the public education system, a well-institutionalized bureaucracy, rejects attempts to change its basic ways of doing business while tolerating "innovation at the margins."

Political obstacles to decentralization may also contribute to the poor results so far. Wong and Peterson (1992) and Hannaway (1992) suggest that those districts with the most complex, fragmented, political environments are often those most in need of reform; yet they exhibit the strongest tendencies toward centralization of control and are least likely to succeed with decentralization. Research by the U.S. Department of Education (1993) supports this view with evidence that school staff perceptions of centralized decisionmaking are positively correlated with district size. Political obstacles can not only impede the introduction of decentralization but can hamper implementation, as central authorities seek ways to reassert control. One

example is the district office that gives schools discretion over use of maintenance funds while reserving authority to veto repair decisions and requiring use of overworked district maintenance workers. Schools have little more real discretion after reform than when decisions were made centrally.

These claims suggest two possibilities regarding decentralization's chief assumption of a connection between governance changes and educational outcomes. It may be that the connection between institutional structure and organizational performance is weak: The assumption that removing constraints will result in more initiative, better instruction, and improved schools is wrong. Or it may be that decentralization efforts are not producing significant changes in institutional structure in the first place: Despite the resources that have been put into decentralization over the past decade, external constraints on schools have not been meaningfully changed. That is, either the organizing principle of decentralization is itself faulty or the implementation of decentralization is so flawed that we cannot know whether that organizing principle works.

This study explores the latter possibility, because it addresses a prior condition for understanding the former possibility. It would be premature to judge the validity of decentralization's chief assumption, as some are beginning to do, until we have a better empirical understanding of the nature of governance changes that decentralization efforts bring about. This study examines the hypothesis that decentralization efforts are failing to produce meaningful governance changes. The starting point is the following definition: *Meaningful school decentralization* is the removing of external constraints on schools and the enabling of school staffs to make decisions about instructional matters. This definition makes explicit the mechanism by which decentralization is assumed to improve school outcomes: placing much greater discretion over decisions in the hands of those closest to the educational process. The study examines the degree of success schools undertaking decentralization have at removing constraints and enabling their staffs to make decisions about the instructional process.

Using individual decisions within schools as the unit of analysis, the study examines the ways in which schools undertaking decentralization go about changing authority over decisionmaking and the na-

ture of the obstacles they encounter in doing so. The study compares patterns of decisionmaking in four high schools that are similar in nearly every respect except governance arrangements. The four cases were drawn from a larger pool examined in my research; they were chosen to represent four points along a spectrum of decentralization.

The first school is located in a city embracing an old-style educational governance system with centralized authority and well-differentiated administrative functions. It serves as an illustration of decisionmaking in traditional, highly bureaucratized public school administration. For comparing among cases, this school was chosen to provide a model of centralized governance with many external constraints on school-level decisionmaking. It is this form of governance that decentralization efforts typically aim to reform.

The second school has been "decentralized." It employs "site-based management," and is typical of many decentralized schools. It was chosen to represent schools that have made modest efforts to move away from centralized governance. For the comparison, it allows an examination of changes in constraints on decisionmaking that follow from a set of simple decentralization efforts.

The third school has implemented extensive decentralization-oriented governance changes. It represents what might be called radical decentralization and provides for an examination of the effects of a set of strenuous governance-reform efforts on decisionmaking.[1]

The last school is private, and by its very nature is independent of centralized authority and hierarchical control. It is included in the study to illustrate a form of governance in which there are very few external constraints on decisions of the school staff.

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[1]Charter schools currently represent an extreme form of public decentralization efforts, and including a charter school case would have provided a logical extension of the comparisons in this study. At the time this research was conducted, no charter schools were well enough established to provide a solid basis for analysis: At schools considered in Minnesota, California, and Arizona, governance arrangements were still evolving and stable patterns of decisionmaking had yet to emerge.

The methodology of this study, therefore, involves four comparative case studies of high schools with different governance arrangements. The value of these cases is that they allow an examination of how constraints on decisionmaking vary across schools with ostensibly very different governance status: one centralized, one modestly decentralized, one radically decentralized, and one independent. The assumption is not that these four schools themselves represent every possible approach to governance; the experiences of public school systems in the United States are far too rich and diverse to admit representation by such a small sample of schools. Rather, the cases represent a fairly wide range of variance in the degree of so-called decentralization present in U.S. high schools, and they allow a close look at the nature of decisionmaking associated with these various degrees of decentralization. The cases provide an opportunity to examine the mechanics of decentralization at a microlevel for common elements and principles that might apply to other schools and school districts.

The findings support the hypothesis that decentralization often fails to effectively remove external constraints on schools and to enable school staffs to make decisions about instructional matters. The main empirical claim is that there is remarkably little difference between decisionmaking constraints at the traditional, centralized school and the "decentralized" schools. In three of the cases, decentralization did not necessarily accomplish its proximate goal of changing governance arrangements and the nature of decisionmaking.

The explanation for this failure is inherent in the nature of decisionmaking and is therefore likely to affect any school undertaking governance reform: The interconnected nature of external constraints often limits the extent to which decentralization efforts change decisionmaking patterns. At these schools, the inseparability of decisions has circumscribed decentralization efforts designed to relax constraints on some decisions while leaving co ıtrols over others in place.

This effect is likely to be general, because, in any institution, constraints on some classes of decisions shape discretion over others. Where decision *A* (e.g., selection of supplementary textbooks) is dependent on decision *B* (e.g., expenditure of funds on educational

materials), then an attempt to decentralize authority over *A* is limited by *B*. The study suggests that to be successful at relaxing constraints on decisionmaking, school decentralization should be designed to encompass a wide range of necessarily interrelated decisions.

The next chapter of this report, Chapter Two, discusses decisionmaking authority and presents a taxonomy of 17 decisions necessary for operating a school. These decisions are the focus of the case studies. Chapter Three provides analyses of decisionmaking authority and external constraints at the four schools. Chapter Four summarizes the comparison among schools and offers conclusions.

The report offers insights to school superintendents, board members, teachers' union heads, teachers, and civic leaders concerned with improving the performance of public school systems through decentralization. Its goal is to offer guidance for the design of successfully decentralized school districts.

Chapter Two

DECISIONS AND DECISIONMAKERS

The governance of schools can be understood in terms of decision-making responsibility. For the purpose of this study, a *governance structure* is a system for assigning responsibility over decisions to people at various levels in a hierarchy and for encoding in rules and regulations prior judgments about appropriate decisions. The aim of decentralization is to shift responsibility over decisions downward, from the topmost levels, or center, of the hierarchy, toward the bottom, or local levels, and to reduce the extent to which centrally determined or negotiated rules limit local decisionmaking discretion (Bimber, 1993). From the perspective of a school, the immediate effect of decentralization is the lifting of constraints on decisionmaking. Teachers and school-site administrators face fewer centrally determined regulations and rules that prescribe certain actions and proscribe others on the basis of school board judgments, state actions, or labor-management negotiation. They are given authority over decisions previously made by administrators higher in the governance structure. The ultimate effect of decentralization is believed to be more effective decisions, better instruction, and improved student performance.

DECISIONS

An educational governance system comprises four categories of decisions: those concerning the *budget and use of funds*, those affecting *personnel*, those affecting *curriculum and pedagogy*, and those having to do with *operations and administration*. Within each category is a potentially large number of decisions concerning everything

from who is employed as a teacher to the length of a class period. The types of constraints on these categories of decisions are measures of the extent to which a school system is centralized or decentralized. Viewed this way, *school governance* means not only the process of budgeting and arriving at districtwide policy decisions, but encompasses the entire range of decisions that give form to a school.

Budget Decisions

Budget decisions are crucial to most organizations. Budget matters are usually the most tightly controlled in traditional public schools, and are highly resistant to decentralization efforts. The most important financial decisions for a school, aside from the size of its total budget, are *distributive*, involving how funds are allocated among accounts and classes of expenditures. The process of budgeting is often labyrinthine, because of the variety of allocating formulas and guidelines that determine the size of categories of expenditure. Typically, choices about how much money is spent on faculty and staff, the largest category of expense, are exogenous to the annual budgeting process for individual schools, because these decisions are made districtwide by school boards and unions.

The fraction of a school's budget that is under the control of officials at the school gives a quick snapshot of the nature of decisionmaking authority. The total cost of operating a large, comprehensive high school in the United States is usually between $3 and $5 million per year. Of that amount, decisionmakers at the school typically have discretion over less than $100,000, or about 2–3 percent. Even in schools with "site-based management" or "school-based decisionmaking," strings can be attached to these "discretionary" funds.

At each school examined in this study, I have characterized responsibility for three types of *budget decisions*: the amount budgeted for salaries and benefits, the amount budgeted for educational supplies and materials, and the allocation of funds for educational supplies and materials among accounts and departments. This set of decisions is not comprehensive, since responsibility over capital expenses, maintenance, utilities, and other items also varies from school to school, but it provides a reliable indicator of authority over arguably the most important budget matters.

Personnel Decisions

Personnel decisions are of great importance to schools. As with most organizations, the human capital of a school is its most vital asset. Decisions about who is hired, who is tenured or released, how staff are evaluated and compensated, and how personnel are allocated among positions determine a great deal about a school's performance. Personnel decisions determine the characteristics of a school's workforce and the types of incentives to which that workforce responds, and they affect the quality of the relationship between teachers and administrators.

Personnel decisions also embody judgments about what it means to be a teacher, and about the objectives and values of a school system. For instance, often personnel decisions in public schools place norms of equity and seniority above performance and merit. Many systems of personnel administration reflect the judgment that teachers should be treated equally with respect to pay, regardless of ability or effort. Examining personnel decisionmaking can reveal a great deal about both the formal structure of governance at a school and the attitudes of staff toward one another and toward the mission of the organization.

Four key decisions represent the core of a school's decisionmaking about personnel matters: the size of the teaching staff, the allocation of personnel among teaching positions (e.g., number of math teachers versus English teachers), the selection of teachers, and the evaluation of teachers. To limit the scope of the inquiry to a manageable size and because of the obviously central role played by teachers, I have focused on personnel decisions affecting teachers, rather than school administrators or other staff, and have excluded some decisions, such as those involving training and professional development.

Curriculum and Instructional Decisions

Decisions about what and how students are taught are myriad. They are made at every level of the administrative hierarchy, from the state agency that sets standards to the teacher in the classroom deciding how to respond to a student who is having difficulty learning. Curriculum and institutional decisions include the choice of frame-

works and standards, the content of courses, and the choice of textbooks. These decisions include whether students are tracked or mainstreamed, and how students are evaluated and graded. Collectively, these decisions determine whether a school offers a general education, a college-preparatory curriculum, vocational training, or some combination.

This study focuses on five decisions that must be made in all schools, regardless of educational mission or organization. These five are necessarily a limited subset of all curriculum and instructional decisions, but they are among the most important of such decisions. They are the selection of textbooks, the selection of supplementary texts and materials, the choice of classroom method and pedagogic style, the addition of a new course to the school's curriculum, and dropping a course from the curriculum. Constraints on these decisions reflect a school's capacity to respond to calls for change and to tailor educational services to perceived student needs.

Operational and Administrative Decisions

Operational decisions reflect physical control of the school and encompass a wide array of administrative matters from student discipline to school hours. Many factors necessarily impinge on these decisions, not all of which are directly related to educational concerns. At one school in this study, for example, school hours depend on public transportation schedules, since students rely on city buses to get to and from school. Work hours and break times in the municipal bus drivers' labor contract can therefore affect the start and end of the school day.

Five decisions are representative of the large class of operational matters. They reflect responsibility over physical management of the school and nature of the environment that students experience when at school: class scheduling, school hours, the length of the school year, suspending a student, and expelling a student.

A Summary of 17 Decisions

The 17 decisions described above are not a comprehensive map of all decisionmaking authority at schools, but they cover much of the im-

portant terrain. They provide a useful basis for examining variation in patterns of authority over decisionmaking. These decisions are summarized as follows:

Budget Decisions

- The amount budgeted for salaries and benefits
- The amount budgeted for educational supplies and materials
- The allocation of funds for educational supplies and materials among accounts and departments.

Personnel Decisions

- The size of the teaching staff
- The allocation of personnel among teaching positions (e.g., number of math teachers versus English teachers)
- The selection of teachers
- The evaluation of teachers.

Curriculum and Instructional Decisions

- Selection of textbooks
- Selection of supplementary texts and materials
- Choice of teaching method and pedagogic style
- Addition of a new course to the school's curriculum
- Elimination of a course from the school's curriculum.

General Operational and Administrative Decisions

- Scheduling of classes
- School hours
- Length of the school year
- The decision to suspend a student
- The decision to expel a student.

DECISIONMAKERS

All school governance systems must make choices about the above decisions. But the way that responsibility is distributed can vary. Schools with authority over a large share of these decisions are relatively free of external constraints. These schools can be described as decentralized. Districts where the focus of responsibility for these decisions lies elsewhere than in the school are not decentralized, regardless of the labels they may adopt. For simplicity, the decisionmakers who may have responsibility for decisions can be grouped in a few major categories: teachers, the principal, main office administrators, the school board, and the state education agency. I have focused on these five; however, the decisionmaking landscape is somewhat more complex, since roles can be differentiated within each group. For instance, department heads can form an additional decisionmaking level among teachers. Assistant or vice principals and other school-level administrators are present in all schools and represent an additional level of decisionmaking control closely associated with that of the principal. There is a great deal of differentiation of roles in main offices among assistant or area superintendents, the staff of personnel and curriculum offices, and the superintendent.

Decisionmaking at these various levels and sublevels is not always a simple or linear process that replicates itself exactly over time. "Decisions" are not necessarily isolated events for which a single "decisionmaker" can be easily identified. For every occasion when a principal summarily makes a decision, there are other instances when she or he may persuade or cajole other decisionmakers above or below her (or him) in the administrative hierarchy. The final decision may reflect the combined choices and preferences of more than one person. Some decisions are made in a consultative manner, with participants at several levels of hierarchy involved. Hiring decisions, for example, may involve many people, starting with a list of eligible candidates drawn up by a central personnel office, followed by a request from a faculty committee for a particular candidate, then a recommendation by a principal, and a final decision made by a superintendent. Responsibility can be shared vertically within a hierarchy, or can be distributed horizontally among faculty or a group of administrators who reach a collective decision together.

An important dimension of decisionmaking is complexity, involving both formal structures and informal organizational culture. The formal structure of the decisionmaking process is based on official rules and procedures that specify how decisions are to be made. Formal components of decisionmaking are the written rules governing who participates in a decision. These rules typically include authority to limit or circumscribe a decision, the authority to make recommendations, and the authority to make a final, binding choice. For example, in the decision to hire a teacher, described above, the central personnel office has the authority to limit the pool of eligible candidates. The principal has authority to recommend, and the superintendent has the authority to decide. Formal decisionmaking arrangements such as this typically reflect the structure of the school system's organization chart.

Included in the formal component of decisionmaking are *labor contracts*, because these encode prior decisions about compensation, the workday, evaluation, and other aspects of administrative control directly affecting teachers. Authority over these decisions is removed from the hands of school administrators by periodic acts of negotiation. Labor contracts are one of the more important components of the formal decisionmaking structure in schools.

The second component of complexity is informal. It involves the decisionmaking style or culture of the organization. Formal organization charts often conceal how personalities, traditions, norms, and other unwritten contours of the administrative landscape shape decisionmaking. Within a given formal structure, styles can vary greatly, from the rigid and hierarchical to the flexible and collegial. Decisionmaking styles represent an informal, normative overlay on the official organization chart.

Three important decisionmaking styles can be present in school systems: bureaucratic, directive, and consultative. A *bureaucratic* style is one in which decisionmaking processes are governed tightly by procedural guidelines that are intended to remove discretion from individuals. Staff do things "by the book" in an organization with a bureaucratic style. They do not strike out on their own, but adhere to well-defined roles and responsibilities. They view compliance with official procedures as the basis for the legitimacy of a decision.

A *directive* style can also be based in part on official differentiation of roles and hierarchical levels, but it is accompanied by deference to one or more primary decisionmakers. In this style, authority accumulates in the hands of a few persons who direct the organization. Staff play by the rules, but, more importantly, they follow the leader. They view the persuasiveness, leadership, or official authority of the directive leader as the basis for the legitimacy of decisions.

A *consultative* style, as briefly described in the above hiring example, is one in which decisionmakers with formal authority consult with others before acting. As with the directive style, official authority rests in the hands of those identified as decisionmakers in formal procedures, but the consultative decisionmaker avoids unilateral decisions in favor of those informed by discussions with others. The leader shares the formal authority of his or her position—for example, the principal who solicits input from other administrators and department heads and who attempts to accommodate their interests and concerns when making a decision. Consultative styles may include majoritarianism, whereby those with formal authority defer to polls of all members of an organization, or may be cliquish, whereby leaders consult a small circle, or cabinet, of colleagues.

These decisionmaking styles can sometimes be present in combination, and they may vary across categories of decisions or with the urgency or level of controversy associated with an issue. A *situational* management style is one in which a combination of approaches is used according to the nature of the decision.

Decisionmaking styles in schools can be, in part, a response to external constraints and the formal structure of decisionmaking, as staff adapt to the boundaries set by rules and regulations and formal incentives. But styles also have an independent component that can reflect the personality of a principal, or the "institutional memory" of an organization contained in the habits, roles, and expectations developed by staff over time. Organizational styles combine with formal rules and the official distribution of responsibility to form the decisionmaking apparatus of school systems. The next chapter examines variation in decisionmaking at the four schools.

Chapter Three

FOUR SCHOOLS

The decentralization movement is largely an urban phenomenon. The administrative problems that decentralization is meant to redress, including inflexible and outmoded central bureaucracies, are generally perceived to be greatest in urban districts. Over the years, the complexity of political demands on urban school systems has elicited attempts by school boards and main offices to centralize decisionmaking and to place constraints on schools consistent with the aim of political actors at the top of education bureaucracies (Wong and Peterson, 1992; Hannaway, 1992). This fact, and the need for effective responses to the cycle of violence, poverty, social alienation, and other problems experienced by many inner-city students, has focused interest in governance reform on the nation's urban school districts, and virtually every one has experimented with decentralization over the past decade.

The high schools described in this report, which I refer to as Lawrence, Madison, Union, and Western, are chosen to be representative of those found in many inner-city areas in the educational challenges they face. They are located in four mid-sized cities in the South, Midwest, and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States. Their student bodies are very much alike socioeconomically. The schools serve primarily low-income students in social settings where crime, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and poverty are a persistent presence. A portion of students at each school lives in public housing projects. With respect to these characteristics, the schools represent matched cases.

What differs among the four schools is their stated governance structure both in terms of the degree of formal centralization in their districts and their decisionmaking cultures. They represent a range of governance arrangements: Lawrence is typical of traditional systems of centralized administration, and Madison and Union represent two forms of site-based management. The fourth school, Western, is unique; it is included in the comparison for the contrasts it affords with the other three. As an independent, nonreligious school located in an inner city, it is something of a rarity in U.S. education. Its students come from the most dangerous and decayed neighborhoods of any of the four schools. Because of its independent status, it represents the extreme case of autonomous, decentralized administration that is free of central control, constraints, and demands for compliance with procedural guidelines and rules.

TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE: LAWRENCE HIGH SCHOOL

"You don't move unless we tell you to."

—A Lawrence administrator describing the attitude of central office staff toward the school

Lawrence High School is a comprehensive, neighborhood school located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the country. It enrolls about 2,000 students in grades nine through twelve. The student body is unusually multiracial, with about 50 percent African-Americans and the remainder divided among ethnic Greeks, Latinos, Asians, and others. About 900 students qualify for federally subsidized lunches on the basis of low family income.

Lawrence offers primarily a general education, emphasizing neither college preparation nor vocational training. Just 12 percent of the 1992 senior class took the SAT in anticipation of attending college, and this group's mean scores on the verbal and math portions of the test were 335 and 373, placing them below the 30th percentile nationally. Only about one in ten Lawrence seniors meets the minimum entrance requirements for the state's university system.

In addition to students' generally poor achievement level, the largest problems at Lawrence are attendance and discipline. The school

classifies 60 percent of the student body as chronically absent and only 7.5 percent as "usually" in attendance. The average absence rate is about 22 percent, meaning that several hundred students are absent every day. The annual dropout rate is about 17 percent, so fewer than half the members of each incoming ninth-grade class remain to complete their senior year. Lawrence is not unusual among neighborhood urban schools.

Decisionmaking at Lawrence

The city in which Lawrence is located is beginning to experiment with decentralization, as it has done several times in past decades, but the school and district still operate very much in the manner of centralized administration traditional in urban school systems. Control over finance, personnel, curriculum, and many operational matters is exercised by central office administrators and is regulated by labor contracts, so teachers and officials in the school have little discretion over most decisions.

Formal procedures, rules, and documentation systems place many constraints on the school, prescribing how decisions are to be made and providing for multiple levels of approval and hierarchical oversight. One school official describes the district's governance structure as "a highly centralized, hidebound system." Likening the relationship between central office administrators and school staff to a "military hierarchy," he says "they perceive us as their good little soldiers who do their bidding." This perception by school staff of inflexibility and mistrust on the part of district administrators is not uncommon at Lawrence. Another school official captures the attitude of the central office toward the school with the command, "You don't move unless we tell you to." A veteran teacher says, "Decisionmaking is top-down, not only in school, but in the city, and the state—we've got top-down all over the place."

The principal at Lawrence is best described as a traditional educator. He holds a doctorate in education and has served at the school for over a decade. In the words of a central office administrator, he is an "old-time" principal. His style is directive. Faculty are notified of his decisions rather than contributing to them. Although he reports trying to take account of teachers' views, faculty complain that he is too authoritarian and that as a rule they are shut out of decisions,

from changes in the school's bell schedule to the elimination of classes and the restructuring of a department's curriculum. A good deal of frustration exists among teachers toward the principal's management style. Although he is well-liked as a person, many resent his approach.

The organizational culture at Lawrence is a combination of the district's hierarchical, bureaucratic nature and the directive style of the principal.

Budget

Lawrence's budget process is a case study in centralized administrative control. It typifies the school's bureaucratic/directive style. The district's annual budget for Lawrence is about $3.3 million, including salaries and benefits, books, materials, supplies, furniture and computer equipment, maintenance, and other miscellaneous costs. Funds for student transportation come from the state and are not included in Lawrence's budget. The same is true of the cafeteria and food costs, which are provided by the federal government and the district. Funds for capital improvements, which are rare, require legislative action by the state and are distributed by the district. Lawrence itself has no capital budget.

When school administrators at Lawrence speak of "the budget," they typically do not refer to the $3.3 million in annual expenditures, but rather to a $54,000 allocation over which the school is given discretion. This amount represents $29.50 per student per year—less than 1 percent of the district's annual expenditure for each student. These funds provide for the purchase of instructional materials, supplies, and textbooks, and go toward other operating costs.

Within the school, this discretionary budget is allocated among budget categories by an assistant principal on behalf of the principal. Teachers and department heads do not prepare budget requests or participate in a budgetary planning process but receive annual allocations from the assistant principal that vary little from year to year.

School control over even these very limited funds is constrained by central office budget administrators, who oversee the use of "discretionary" money, exercising the right to approve all decisions.

A good example of the constraints on ostensibly discretionary funds comes from the school's recent attempt to purchase a typewriter for an assistant principal. The central office objected to the purchase, returning Lawrence's request with an explanation that the justification for the purchase was insufficient. Purchasing the typewriter eventually required that an assistant principal provide a full page of "tightly worded" written justification to the main office. The careful scrutiny given judgments by Lawrence officials is typical of the orientation of the district's administrative system toward central control and procedural compliance.

As at all schools, most of Lawrence's budget (96 percent) goes for salaries and benefits, and control over these funds is also heavily constrained. Salary decisions are made districtwide by the board of education and are shaped by contract negotiations with unions representing teachers and other staff. Like funds allocated for transportation, food, and capital expenses, the personnel budget is nondiscretionary from the perspective of the school. The encumbering of the school's budget means that school officials may not shift funds from one category of expense to another in response to changing circumstances or needs. The inflexibility of the budget at Lawrence has effects throughout the decisionmaking structure, because it shapes everything from personnel decisions to access to textbooks.

Personnel

Personnel decisions at Lawrence depend ultimately on two related factors: seniority requirements and other stipulations in the teachers' labor contract, and the management of a central pool of qualified, prioritized job candidates by the city's district office. The number of faculty at Lawrence is determined by formula and is based on the number of students projected by the district in April to enroll the next fall. Lawrence regularly counts more students in the fall than the district has projected, and requests an enrollment audit by the district. The result is typically a period of negotiation about the number of students at the school and, consequently, the number of staff to which Lawrence is entitled. Last year, for instance, the incoming freshman class was larger than projected, by several hundred students. The principal appealed for more teachers under the for-

mula. In mid-October, well after the start of school, the district notified Lawrence that it qualified for a fourth assistant principal and some new teachers. But by that time Lawrence was too late to attract candidates from the central list for all the new positions, so some positions went unfilled. This cycle has become routine for personnel allocation at Lawrence in recent years.

The principal is given discretion over which departments are to receive new teachers, within limits set by class-size standards. When the need for additional teachers is established, Lawrence draws from the central pool of eligible staff. This pool is divided into three lists, with descending priority: "surplussed" teachers from under-enrolled schools, those seeking voluntary transfers, and newly hired teachers. When Lawrence has an opening in the math department, for example, the math teacher at the top of the district's surplus list is entitled to the position. If there are no surplussed math teachers, those on the voluntary-transfer list have a right to the position. If no transfers are waiting, the district moves to the new-hire list. When there is more than one eligible candidate, the principal is given the opportunity to place a request for his preferred candidate.

In practice, most teachers arrive at Lawrence from the surplus and transfer lists, so neither Lawrence teachers nor the principal has much say in who teaches at the school. Some administrators complain that the process places little value on teachers' skill and abilities or appropriateness for Lawrence, because the process is organized around the principle of job entitlement on the basis of seniority. The central list does not provide an adequate supply of teachers to meet demand, and one official at Lawrence reports that many schools in the district have developed the attitude that it is better to have a poor teacher than none at all.

Problems with personnel selection are exacerbated by a perfunctory evaluation system that does not function well and that often passes along teachers with professional-development problems from school to school. Strained labor-management relations make some teachers resentful that an evaluation process exists at all. Moreover, because no rewards are attached to good evaluations and because sanctions resulting from negative evaluations "lack teeth," teachers have few incentives to take the evaluation process seriously. One Lawrence staff member described his regular evaluations to me as

something of a ritual, in which he nods along and agrees with the supervisor's judgments, then goes back to work without thinking about them again. "My pay is set," he observes, and his tenure is virtually guaranteed.

When an administrator rates a teacher's performance as unsatisfactory, a system of professional-development procedures is initiated in which the administrator is obligated to implement a teacher-assistance plan and to assume a large part of the responsibility for improving the teacher's performance. Several years of unsatisfactory ratings and failed assistance plans must accumulate before the principal has the option of dismissing a teacher. Administrators find burdensome the process of teacher assistance and documentation of poor performance, because they feel not enough responsibility lies with the teacher for improving his or her performance. This system serves as a disincentive to administrators, who typically try to avoid the process except in the most egregious cases. The principal reports that, to avoid the work that accompanies an honest appraisal, administrators at schools in his district often give unacceptable teachers satisfactory ratings. Lawrence's principal has sometimes negotiated with poor teachers to avoid rating them as unsatisfactory, offering them a good rating in return for their resignation from the school. The evaluation system functions well only at the margins; neither teachers nor administrators have incentives to use it constructively.

Curriculum

Many aspects of curriculum and instruction are out of the hands of teachers and administrators at Lawrence. The district's Instructional and Curriculum Division interprets state curriculum mandates and establishes course outlines for teachers' classes. Lesson plans and tests must meet the requirements of the district guidelines. Decisions about textbooks are also made centrally. The district issues a manual guiding textbook selection, labelled the "Textbook Management Plan." This plan specifies acceptable textbooks for various classes, leaving little to the discretion of teachers. The effect of "the list," as it is called, combined with budget constraints, is that many teachers have no choice over which texts they use in their classes. Social studies and science teachers at Lawrence must teach

from challenging college-level texts that most of Lawrence's low-achieving students find unengaging and irrelevant. Given the opportunity, they would select textbooks they consider more appropriate to students' needs.

Aside from the choice of textbooks and structuring of course outlines, decisions about what goes on in the classroom are largely up to teachers. Instructional techniques are teachers' responsibility; so are decisions about the use of supplementary texts and materials, although these must also be selected from a list approved by the district and are limited by the school's constrained budget. These matters are the province of a teacher's greatest involvement in school decisionmaking; yet, constraints on other related aspects of the instruction process place limits on the effectiveness of a teacher's discretion.

Creating a new course in response to changing student needs is centrally controlled and involves several levels of decisionmaking authority. The request for a new class is prepared by teachers and school administrators, and, with the agreement of the principal, is forwarded to the assistant superintendent for approval. With the assistant superintendent's approval, documentation describing the class is sent to the Division of Curriculum and Instruction for review. The final step, which ironically can be the most difficult for school officials, is the assignment of a course number by the district's computer center, an office about which school officials have many complaints of foot-dragging, unresponsiveness, and inflexibility. On the other hand, the principal is given the unilateral discretion to drop a course, provided it is an elective.

Operational and Administrative Decisions

Operational and administrative decisionmaking by Lawrence officials is constrained in a variety of ways. One means is "top-down" management, whereby control over information is highly centralized. The central office maintains student files and enrollment records on behalf of Lawrence, and acts as a gatekeeper to this information. To obtain information as simple as an alphabetical list of students or a list by grade-point average, the principal must place a request by telephone to the district office. The list is prepared by the central computer facility and hand-delivered across town to

Lawrence. The cumbersome and time-consuming process hinders Lawrence's ability to obtain information about its own students.

Many key decisions are structured to require the involvement of central officials or to provide uniformity across schools districtwide or statewide. Decisions about the school year, the length of the school day, and the scheduling of classes have this characteristic; they are made by the principal and assistant principals within state and district guidelines. The principal has authority to suspend students for up to three days; greater disciplinary action entails expulsion from the school and is controlled by central office administrators.

The choice to participate in this study provides another interesting example of centralized constraints on decisions. Approval of the principal's agreement to allow a researcher on campus for a few days was made by the district's Division of Planning, Testing, Research, and Evaluation. A written application form was required, and the researcher was provided guidelines for submission, written definitions of terms, and a flowchart describing how the approval process works. The flowchart specified which decisionmakers would be involved in approving the request, from the principal up to the board of education, depending on the size of the study, and provided a timetable showing the number of weeks required for the approval (from five to 11). An appeal process for rejected research applicants was described. As with many administrative matters, the district has codified a decisionmaking system that limits the ability of school authorities to act and that provides multiple layers of verification for subordinates' judgments.

SITE-BASED MANAGEMENT: MADISON HIGH SCHOOL

"The system is dysfunctional."

—A central office administrator

Madison is a comprehensive urban high school in a Midwestern city, with an enrollment of about 1,100 in grades nine through twelve. As at Lawrence, most Madison students are not college-bound; about one-third pursue higher education after graduation. The student

body at Madison is composed of "minority inner-city students," in the words of a counselor at the school. Eighty-seven percent of the school's students are African-American, and the remainder are Hispanic, Asian, and Caucasian. About one-third receive public assistance.

In 1977, the city's public schools were desegregated. Under the court order, "cluster zones" were created to pair schools on the city's African-American east side with mainly Caucasian schools across the river. In addition to bringing a small group of white students to Madison, the court order also meant that the school lost its honors program, because the district decided to locate only one set of honors courses in each cluster; in Madison's case, the honor classes went to its sister school across town.

As at Lawrence, Madison's largest problems are student absences (14 percent daily) and the class failure rate (also 14 percent), although both are improving. One teacher says that the biggest problem at Madison is student "attitude." He says that many kids do not see a reason to take education seriously and "aren't here to learn." "A lot of students don't want a diploma," he says. "They don't see the relationship of the diploma or proficiency-test score to their life." In a 1992 survey, the problems deemed most in need of improvement by teachers were order and discipline, academics-related problems, and attendance. The school's annual dropout rate is about 11 percent, down from over 16 percent the previous year, and so only about 63 percent of entering students finishes four years later.

Decisionmaking at Madison

Madison has clambered onto the decentralization bandwagon. Reading about Madison and talking with education officials in the city, one is led to believe that the district has in place an innovative, flexible administrative structure that gives initiative and discretion to schools. Like all schools in the city, Madison has operated under school-based management for a decade. A recent annual budget and administrative plan produced by the district prominently describes this system:

> Management of the District's schools is decentralized. The concept of School Based Management has been in place since 1983. The

> concept enables the principal, staff and School Community Council to channel available resources toward the school's priorities and to plan for educational and school improvements knowing how they will pay for them.

Although well-meaning, this description is more than a little misleading. In practice, the amount of real authority that has been given to Madison and other high schools under the decentralization plan is extremely limited. Almost all decisions are still made centrally, and the school is subject to many rules that constrain its ability to take responsibility for educational problems, to make small repairs, even to do much-needed painting. Among the principal's chief complaints is the unresponsiveness of the district bureaucracy.

For instance, as at many urban schools, the physical plant at Madison needs attention. The heating, ventilation, and cooling system is in need of urgent repair, the building needs painting, and the roof requires maintenance. But there is little that Madison can do to remedy these problems, except appeal to the district for help, because it has little decisionmaking authority regarding its physical facilities. School officials complain that often *years* pass after a request for repairs before the district's trades workers respond. In fact, the school does not have the authority to "channel resources" that the district advertises. Instead, staff sometimes devise strategies for circumventing central office control, such as labelling a repair or painting effort a "student project," and thereby avoiding the scrutiny of the main office. The assistant superintendent responsible for Madison confirms that, in practice, little real decentralization exists, despite the widespread use of the term "school-based management." He describes the centralized administrative organization as "dysfunctional."

Two bright spots in Madison's management and decisionmaking arrangements are its principal and a business partnership with a local utility. The principal, who is well-respected by teachers and central office administrators, has introduced a climate of self-evaluation and improvement at Madison, and with the assistance of the business partner, has implemented new management techniques oriented toward outcomes. For example, because the district's educational evaluation office is very slow in providing data to the school on standardized test performance, Madison has taken the initiative of pur-

chasing its own automated test-scanning equipment and software so that it can gather and evaluate data itself.

The business partnership, which all schools in the district have, initially took time to develop but has proven a useful resource. Both teachers' anxieties about the introduction of business techniques and the company's frustration with the methods of a public bureaucracy have faded. The firm provides little direct funding to the school, instead lending expertise in management and planning. Through the business partnership, Madison has adopted a management-by-objective scheme, and now develops a 3-year, rather than 12-month, administrative and budget plan. An on-site representative from the business participates in nearly every school activity.

Innovation at Madison has taken place within the district's traditional decisionmaking structure. The rules and external constraints on Madison are virtually the same as those on Lawrence. What differences exist between the schools are attributable not to a relaxation of formal control by the district, but to the principal's desire for change and her skill at working with the old system. She has earned the trust of her assistant superintendent, who serves as an ally in her efforts to create reform within the interstices of existing institutional structures. She uses a consultative decisionmaking style to build a base of support within the school.

Budget

Rhetoric and reality are quite different in Madison's budget. The district claims that the school-based budgeting plan "places spending authority at the local school level and gives the principal resources, responsibility, and accountability." Although this may sound like lump-sum budgeting, in fact it means that Madison's discretionary budget is $375,000 out of $3 million, or 7 percent, and that the school has fewer constraints on the use of this money than before decentralization. This represents a real change in the distribution of responsibility over funds, but falls significantly short of shifting the focus of budget responsibility out of the main office and into the hands of school staff.

Allocative decisions within the school for the discretionary budget are made by the principal, who distributes funds according to a for-

mula that factors in the number of students in each course and the variation in materials costs across departments. There is some flexibility in the process.

Decisions about capital expenditures and funds for repair are made by the district at the request of the principal. They involve a multilayered decisionmaking process. A request from the principal to repair a broken air-conditioning unit, for example, must first pass the plant management and operations office, then be approved by the deputy administrator in charge of operations, then by the superintendent, and finally by the board itself. Only overworked, board-approved workers may conduct repairs, further constraining decisionmaking options.

Personnel

The principal at Madison usually has greater discretion over who is hired to teach than does her counterpart at Lawrence, not because formal constraints are different, but because a better supply of teachers is available. She consults with faculty through hiring committees so that teachers are drawn into hiring decisions. A central pool of job candidates is managed by the district, with surplussed faculty receiving top priority. Unlike Lawrence, Madison is typically supplied a list of several eligible candidates, from whom a committee of teachers, administrators, parents, and a student make recommendations to the principal. The principal then recommends a candidate to the district, which usually approves her choice.

Local control over personnel decisions ends with the offer of a job to a new teacher. Promotion from probation to a continuing contract is a nearly automatic process, so the judgment period is meaningful only for identifying and excluding exceptionally poor teachers. One faculty member says that she "cannot imagine what a new teacher would have to do" for tenure to be denied. After tenure, teachers' performance is not evaluated. Once a job offer is extended, the personnel management system at Madison runs on autopilot.

Curriculum and Instruction

As at Lawrence, control over curriculum and instructional decision is divided. Teachers have discretion over how to teach their students, subject to the constraints imposed by centralized decisions about textbooks and course design. Textbook decisions are made by the central office, based on recommendations of districtwide committees of teachers. As at Lawrence, teachers are free to supplement basal texts with additional materials, but tight and inflexible budgets circumscribe choices. Creating a new class to update the school's curriculum is a major undertaking for Madison, as is dropping an existing class. Approval for changes in the class offering is required not only at the district level, as at Lawrence, but also by the state. On the whole, curriculum decisions at Madison are no less centralized than in most school systems.

Operational and Administrative Decisions

Control over operational and administrative matters at Madison is much like that at Lawrence. The formal decisionmaking structure for operational matters is similar. The principal has authority to suspend students, whereas expulsion decisions are made by the district on the basis of a hearing by the Office of Pupil Adjustment. School hours and the length of the school year follow state standards, as they do at Lawrence. The most significant differences between the schools stem from the principal's ability to work within the confines of the system, turning improvements in the facility into student projects, which are subject to fewer constraints, or undertaking such activities as planning exercises that are not controlled by the main office or state.

SCHOOL-BASED DECISIONMAKING: UNION HIGH SCHOOL

"You get the feeling you can try anything."

—A Union teacher

Union High School is located at the edge of a southern city. It enrolls about 1,200 students in grades nine through twelve. As at Madison

and Lawrence, most students at Union are not college-bound. The student body is composed chiefly of low-income students who come from three types of background: urban students who are bused, under a desegregation order, from public housing projects in the city's downtown area; working-class students from the suburban neighborhood around Union High; and a few students from outlying rural areas who also come from low-income families. About 40 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches, and more who qualify do not take advantage of the program. About 28 percent of the students are African-American, and the remainder are Caucasian. One teacher describes the school as well-integrated racially, because of the African-American students bused into the Caucasian neighborhood, but segregated economically, because almost all students come from similarly disadvantaged financial backgrounds.

One of the school's largest problems is the student-parenthood rate—a common problem for urban schools almost everywhere, but especially so in this city. About one-third of Union boys and girls are parents, placing a tremendous strain on the students, the school, and the communities from which they come. Local attitudes about teen pregnancy have been an obstacle to the school's attempts to respond to the problem. Some of the school's efforts, such as offering parenting instruction during an independent-activities period for students, have drawn sarcastic criticism that Union is operating a magnet program for pregnant students. Some community members have charged that an article in the city's newspaper praising Union's efforts amounted to "bad publicity" and will result in decreased enrollment at the school under the city's open-enrollment plan.

Despite the tremendous social problems facing Union High, the school boasts favorable attendance and dropout figures. For the 1991–1992 school year, Union's dropout rate was 4.8 percent, just slightly higher than the overall city average of 3.1 percent, and has been declining steadily from nearly 9 percent four years ago. The attendance rate is 91 percent, about the same as the citywide average. The school provides a remarkably safe and orderly learning environment that is not disrupted by the kinds of discipline problems that plague many otherwise similar schools. Student violence is not a major problem, although there is minor gang and drug activity. Racial incidents occur at Union but are no longer the major prob-

lems they were when busing began in 1975. At that time, Caucasian families who objected to the court order rioted, and the National Guard was called out to enforce the plan. Despite these successes, Union is not strong academically. College-going rates are about one-third. The school ranked in the bottom quartile of the city's 21 high schools on a 1993 statewide academic rating program.

Decisionmaking at Union High School

Union is located in the only urban district in its state, and it benefits immeasurably from the support of a city superintendent both dedicated to decentralization and successful at creating harmonious relations with the board and the teachers' union. For nearly ten years, the city has experienced none of the rancor and mistrust that divide most urban unions and school boards. The superintendent's model of the role of the district office is not unlike the one that guides charter schools: He claims the district's purpose is to provide technical assistance and support to the schools, rather than to structure or constrain how they deliver services. The superintendent says that his job is to "give away power" to the schools, and he jokes that eventually he will "work [himself] out of a job." He endorses the idea that schools should decide for themselves how best to meet the needs of their students. He has backed up this rhetoric with concrete actions: He has brokered contract changes that relax constraints on school decisionmaking and has contributed to an overhaul of the state education rules that deregulated some school decisions. He also restructured the district's organization, eliminating all intermediate levels of authority between his office and schools. The city's 134 principals now report directly to him, and so do not work within the kind of multilayered decisionmaking structure facing their colleagues at Lawrence and Madison. As Union's principal puts it, "I used to get three no's on the way up to the superintendent." Now she can seek his decisions on matters directly.

The supportive relationship among the superintendent, board, and union, and their shared commitment to decentralization, has created a climate conducive to substantive change. Union is in its seventh year of major reform and restructuring efforts. The school is experimenting with a variety of educational reforms at once, some focused on governance, some on pedagogy, and others on teachers' motiva-

tion and professionalism. Since the arrival of a reform-minded principal in 1986, Union has developed a portfolio program for student assessments and joined the Coalition of Essential Schools, developing a cross-departmental organization that teams teachers and enabling special-education students to be mainstreamed. Union has also developed a magnet program for attracting students under the district's new open-enrollment system, developed alliances with a local university and a local educational think tank, and has won a grant from the Southern Regional Education Board for staff and course development.

Decentralization is the centerpiece of change at Union. The school has established a participatory management system that it labels "school-based decisionmaking" (SBDM). Policy decisions are the shared responsibility of administrators, teachers, parents, and students. In the minds of the staff, the process for decisionmaking provides a venue for legitimating choices.

An SBDM council at Union is made up of 24 official members: eight teachers, eight parents, two community members who are not parents, four students, one member of the school's nonteaching staff, and the principal. In theory, the purpose of the council is to function as the school's board of directors by making policy decisions, while the principal acts as operational manager and CEO. Because the distinction between the political process of choosing policies and the ostensibly administrative process of implementing them is not sharp, the balance of power between the SBDM council and the principal is defined by careful negotiation and the skills of participants.

The council has been successful while similar bodies at schools in other cities have failed, for a number of reasons. Most important is the adeptness of the principal in managing issues and maintaining an effective relationship with council members. She deliberately does not serve as chair of the council, despite her superintendent's wishes that she do so, in order to signal deference to the group and to establish a sense of independence between the administration and the council. She exercises much of her influence by acting as a gatekeeper, filtering requests for decisions and thereby shaping the group's agenda. Issues that are not decided by the SBDM council stay in her office for a decision or are tabled.

The SBDM council recently decided to install vending machines on campus to raise money for student activities. The proposal grew to be especially hotly contested among faculty on and off the council. Although the principal opposed the decision, the council eventually chose to install the machines. There was some sentiment among administrators that the principal should have made the decision herself as an operational matter, rather than elevating it to a schoolwide policy question. Yet the principal has been wise at choosing her battles carefully; the SBDM council has so far never overturned a decision she has made independently.

The council is successful also because of its use of a Quaker-like process of *consensus*: Members act only on a sense of the meeting rather than by vote. Meetings are driven by an unlikely discussion process structured to air all points of view and informed by a norm of equity and fairness that prevents discussions from decaying into debating matches.

Since unanimity is rare, the key to consensus is the treatment of dissent. Where there is significant disagreement and a vocal minority, consensus fails and the proposal under discussion is put off or shelved. Where opposition is limited, consensus is established by asking dissenters to agree to a trial of the proposal in spite of their opposition. If the minority does not object to implementation, consensus is said to be reached.

Staff at Madison claim the process prevents saboteurs from later obstructing implementation of a decision. They feel that, when a minority is outvoted, its members have license to work against a decision. In their view, consensus legitimates new ideas and co-opts opposition.

The council uses standing task forces on budget, curriculum, and other matters to conduct preliminary inquiries into issues. These task forces are charged with gathering information and preparing proposals for consideration by the council. Task force and council members have a representative function, and consult informally with the faculty to develop a sense of opinion within the school on issues of broad importance. If the council finds strongly divided views, it may defer to the faculty body as a whole by calling a schoolwide decisionmaking meeting, extending the consensus process to all staff.

Department and teaching-team cliques are broken up by random assignment to discussion groups. Debate is structured around a series of four questions aimed at benefits of the proposal, the drawbacks, the resources needed to carry out the proposal, and whether participants would agree to a pilot implementation.

Another reason for Union's success is a provision in the teachers' labor contract allowing schools to vote waivers in contract rules. Two-thirds of the faculty of any school in the district may collectively waive contract provisions. The labor contract is a significant part of any school's governance structure, because it shapes teachers' work and circumscribes many administrative changes. Union's capacity to modify certain provisions is a large element of its decentralized control.

Budget

Budget decisions at Union are almost entirely outside the jurisdiction of the school's SBDM council and its principal. Of the $3.1 million in regular district funds allocated to the school, about $3.0 million goes to salaries and benefits over which the school has no authority. Control over expenditures for utilities, major repairs, regular bus transportation, and capital improvements is exercised by the district, leaving Union's principal discretion over about $75,000, or 2.5 percent. (One-third of this money is encumbered by special-education programs and student activities, so real discretionary funds are actually closer to $50,000.) This budget is allocated to the principal and assistant principals, with the approval of the decisionmaking council. Constraints on decisionmaking about budgetary matters at Union are not unlike those at Lawrence.

Personnel

Personnel decisionmaking also resembles that at Lawrence and Madison. Union is allocated faculty positions by the district according to enrollment, and has discretion over the assignment of positions within certain limits. For instance, Union recently eliminated a full-time counselor position and hired two part-time counselors from the savings. Although there was money left over, budget encumbrances prevented the use of the savings for other expenses.

The district office maintains a pool of eligible teachers, with job rights assigned on the basis of seniority. In most cases, the district provides Union three eligible candidates for each teaching position, from which the SBDM council ultimately chooses. Unlike their counterparts at Madison, teachers at Union are evaluated regularly by administrators, but, as in many school systems, the evaluations are perfunctory. Neither administrators nor teachers have incentives to take the evaluations seriously, so little meaning is attached to them.

Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum and instructional decisions are an area where Union's decentralized structure plays a key role. The school has a large measure of discretion over how and what students are taught. Union has established eight teams, with names chosen by students, for organizing instruction and linking teachers' efforts. Coordination of teaching material with common subjects and questions joins together concepts taught in social studies, history, and English literature. Vocabulary taught in an English class, for example, is reinforced in a history lesson. This level of coordination has required flexibility on the part of both teachers and administrators, and has been facilitated by the SBDM council's decisionmaking. Textbooks are selected centrally by the district, but teachers feel free to improvise, organizing their courses on their own and using whatever educational materials they can obtain. Some teachers use authorized texts; others do not. One teacher observes slyly that state law requires students to have textbooks available to them, but does not require teachers to use them. This teacher leaves textbooks stacked on shelves, in compliance with the law, for any student who wants one, but arranges her courses using other materials she feels are more suitable for students.

Operational and Administrative Decisions

Union has seized as much initiative as it can over matters of administration, although some decisions are still handled traditionally. For instance, the principal has suspension authority but defers to the district office for expulsions. On some matters, the school has successfully requested exception to minor district

policies, for instance, with respect to substitute assignments. Because teachers were dissatisfied with centrally assigned substitute teachers, the principal persuaded the superintendent to allow her to have discretion over substitutes. In some areas, this kind of initiative has been even more pronounced. A major innovation in recent years was deviation from the district bell schedule and the creation of a 25-minute independent learning period, in which students receive individual assistance from teachers. Some students use the time for make-up work or for improving poor grades. One teacher has developed a short parenting class for teen mothers and fathers, in which she teaches elementary parenting skills such as reading to children and teaching colors.

This teacher-guided-assistance period illustrates an important feature of constraints on school decisionmaking: how highly interdependent decisions can be. It was made possible only through a waiver in the teachers' labor contract, because the period involves an extra 25 minutes of student supervision by teachers each day, a change disallowed by the contract. The SBDM council was able to adopt the independent period because of a contract provision allowing waivers at school.

The council also used the waiver mechanism to change the way in which report cards are distributed. The council wanted faculty to hold face-to-face meetings with parents to discuss grades, rather than sending report cards home with students. A waiver was needed to permit teachers to remain at school for meetings in the evening, when parents are available.

INDEPENDENT GOVERNANCE: WESTERN HIGH SCHOOL

"It's not about policy; it's about people."

—A Western administrator describing administrative policy at the school

Western is an independent high school located in the inner city of a Midwestern metropolitan area. It serves about 500 students from one of the poorest, most crime-ridden sections of the city, including a huge public housing project that is notorious nationwide for vio-

lence. The neighborhood around Western is the province of street gangs, and the school is surrounded by vacant lots and abandoned buildings. As the school's principal says matter-of-factly, "this is a dangerous area." An armed city police officer sits inside the entrance to deter gang members from entering the building.

Western is one of only a handful of nonreligious private schools in the nation serving African-American inner-city students. As one faculty member at Western says, "The odds are against the school," just as the odds are against public schools in most urban areas that must deal with poverty, drugs, gang-related violence, single-parent or no-parent families, and cultural alienation from the social mainstream. Many students, including those from the projects, attend Western for free. The school provides full scholarships with funds donated by corporations, individuals, and charitable groups. Other students pay varying amounts of tuition up to a maximum of $2,800 per year. Families obtain funds from a variety of sources; some students have arrived at the school cashier with their grandmother's social security checks as payment.

Despite the long odds, Western is widely regarded as a stunning educational success. The school is quiet and orderly, and violence inside the building is rare. Most impressively, since 1989 every graduating senior has been accepted to college, an accomplishment about which any public school could be proud, let along those in neighborhoods like Western's.[1] A few students study advanced-placement calculus. Students entering are required only to place at or above the bottom 35th percentile on national exams, and the average entering student places in the 45th percentile; so the school is not creaming the most academically gifted students. Total per-pupil spending at Western is about $4,200 per year, lower than that at any of the public schools studied for this report, and about 76 percent of the national average.

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[1]About 63 percent of incoming freshmen eventually graduates, a figure comparable to that in inner-city public schools.

Decisionmaking at Western

Western's governance structure is exceedingly simple. The principal is the locus of all authority and the arbiter of all decisions. He has served at the school for nearly two decades and was a founder of the institution in its present incarnation.

Western was originally a Catholic school founded in the 1920s. The city's archdiocese decided to abandon Western in the 1970s, after a dramatic change in demographics had altered the neighborhood. The principal took over operation of the school after the archdiocese's decision, purchasing the building for a nominal price and raising funds to hire teachers. He has nurtured its development as an independent institution. As leader of the organization, he now has the credibility and authority among staff that comes from having served in such a special capacity. In many ways, the school is the embodiment of the principal's style and personality, and his control of every aspect of the school is largely unchallenged. He lives in several rooms of the school's huge stone building and is a symbol for its presence in the decayed neighborhood.

The principal reports to a board of directors. But this group is not involved in operational matters or policy decisions; it places few constraints on what the principal can do. It limits itself almost exclusively to fund-raising and other support functions. The principal has worked diligently to maintain the board's distance from school decisionmaking, and has resisted attempts by board members to become involved in his decisions, even when doing so has required threatening to resign.

The principal's style is directive, as is to be expected from someone with such an intimate connection to the school. In the words of one of his assistants, he is "not a consensus person." As chief executive, he has gathered around himself a cabinetlike circle of administrators. The carefully selected group meets weekly to discuss issues and to assist the principal with decisions by both discussing issues and proposing solutions. Although the cabinet is free to try to persuade the principal of their views, it is understood that decisions are ultimately his. Membership in the "administrative team," as it is called, is not a right of position or title at the school, but is a privilege bestowed by the principal. Participation is offered as much on the ba-

sis of individual chemistry with the principal as on function at the school. The previous business manager was a member, for example, but after her departure the principal did not invite her replacement to join the group.

There is very little formal structure at Western, and virtually no rules govern decisionmaking and the distribution of authority. Titles are unimportant and not used much. One of the principal's primary assistants, who would be a vice principal at most schools, could not give me a succinct statement of her title aside from "aide to the principal." Western has few codified administrative policies or rules to structure the making of decisions. Instead, decisions arise from informal and often ad hoc discussions among the principal, his administrative team, and individual teachers. In trying to explain the absence of procedures and rules, one administrator explained that things happen on the basis of people's wishes and relationships rather than on the basis of established policies. She says, "If you want to get something done around here, you talk to a few people, then you go to [the principal]. He makes the decision."

Budget

Budgeting at Western illustrates the school's lack of routinized procedures: There is no budget process. One member of the administrative team remarked, "The mechanics of how things work is not written down." Individual departments have no budgets but request funds as needs arise. The principal signs every check drawn on the school's funds and acts as guardian of the school's budget. In contrast to Lawrence, Madison, and Union, whose budgets are specified in page after page of allocations among detailed categories of expense, Western's annual budget documentation consists of one sheet listing sources of revenue and two sheets listing expenses.

Administrators explain the informality of budgeting at Western in terms of the school's poverty, noting that the revenue stream is so irregular that the school can never be sure how much money it will have to work with or even whether there will be enough funds to keep the lights on in the building. Budget decisions also reflect the principal's desire for personal control over the school.

Personnel

The personnel system at Western is as flexible as the control over funds, and, again, is administered personally by the principal, with the assistance of his cabinet. Teachers do not have continuing contracts or enjoy tenure rights at Western. Employment agreements for the school's 37 teaching faculty last one year and are renewable on good performance. At the end of the year, most faculty are invited to return. As many as two or three are dismissed each year for unacceptable performance. About one-third of the faculty may turn over voluntarily. Turnover occurs almost exclusively among young teachers who come to Western for a short-term experience serving inner-city students. The faculty is therefore divided into three cadres: short-timers, such as a husband-and-wife team just returned from the Peace Corps looking for a related experience; a middle group of more-seasoned teachers with several years' experience at Western; and veterans who, like the principal, have made a lifelong commitment to the school.

Evaluation of teaching performance has more meaning at Western than at Lawrence, Madison, or Union. Teachers are evaluated by the curriculum director, who visits the classrooms of new teachers three or four times in their first semester. Department heads also have responsibility for teachers' performance and help the curriculum director identify those needing assistance. Moreover, teachers are evaluated by students through a survey. Poor evaluations can lead directly to nonrenewal of a teacher's contract. Western has no system of structured probation periods, routinized assistance plans, deference to seniority or systems of appeal and bargaining; it relies on the good-faith efforts of teachers and administrators.

The teachers' relationship with the principal at Western is unusual and subtle. As one might expect, teachers sometimes feel left out of decisions and are uncertain whether their input is counted when the principal and administrative team make policy for the school. In this regard, their relationship bears similarities to that at Lawrence High School, where the principal's style is similarly directive.

Yet the similarity ends there, because, as one teacher says, "there is no sense of us-and-them between teachers and administrators" at Western. Teachers do not see the principal as the administrator of a

system of rules and procedures, but as the leader in a crusade whose goals they share. Most staff attribute the success of the school to the principal, because he has demonstrated to them his ability to educate students under the direst of circumstances. He derives credibility and legitimacy from this impression. One staff member observes that the principal has "committed his life to the school" and is a "source of power to faculty." At the same time that faculty sometimes wish for more input, they generally respect the principal's decisive leadership.

Curriculum

Teachers have a great deal of classroom autonomy at Western, more so than at public schools. Without the constraints of state or district decisionmaking, teachers have wide discretion over selection of textbooks and supplementary materials, and over the structure of classes. Teachers provide a syllabus for their courses to administrators for review, but they do not submit lesson plans unless they are having problems. The budget places constraints on teachers' choice of texts, not because of encumbrances on funds but because the school so often struggles to make ends meet. Teachers have wide latitude to propose new courses and other changes in the curriculum, with the approval of the principal. The school's basic curriculum easily passes accreditation requirements, and there are few constraints on changes to the curriculum.

Operational and Administrative Decisions

Operational control of the school is firmly in the hands of the principal, who determines policies and makes and interprets rules, from school hours to the behavior code. His guiding principle is to provide a highly structured environment for students, where expectations for proper behavior are abundantly clear and sanctions for infractions are swift and certain. Commenting on his philosophy, he says, "It's about control and respect."

Students know that "if you screw up, you're going to be dealt with," says the principal. Students serve Saturday detention for offenses as minor as chewing gum in class, and they are fined for accumulated infractions, starting at $20 for five offenses. As one school official

puts it, "In this neighborhood, money talks." A student-discipline court metes out some punishments, which can include washing walls or scrubbing toilets. Cutting just one class precipitates a Saturday detention and fine. The principal is the enforcer of this behavior code.

The principal expels problem students regularly. He says, "If I catch a student giving a gang hand signal in the hallway, he's gone." He adds, "There's no long, drawn-out hearing" or due-process procedures. When he once expelled a student for refusing to fill out a summer-job application, his heavy-handed action generated local attention in the media and eventually made national news. The principal scoffs at complaints about his violating students' civil rights, finding such concerns misguided and patronizing of his students, who face violent and poverty-stricken lives. He believes that concerns about students' rights are abstractons imposed by well-meaning advocates who do not understand Western's neighborhood. He views his mission as that of saving young lives.

Academic standards are as high and inflexible as behavioral ones. Entering juniors sign a contract agreeing to make a cumulative grade point average of 2.0 by the end of the year. Those failing to "make contract" are summarily dismissed. The principal says he does not tolerate excuses or explanations, however compelling they might seem.

Chapter Four

COMPARISON OF GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS

SUMMARY OF THE FOUR CASES

Lawrence, Madison, Union, and Western represent four approaches to urban education. This chapter summarizes decisionmaking arrangements at each school, then draws conclusions about the comparison.

Lawrence

Lawrence High School typifies traditional, centralized school governance. For this comparison, it represents a school without decentralization. Teachers and administrators at Lawrence are subject to a variety of constraints on decisionmaking that are associated with its rule-based administrative system. Systems such as this function on the principle that many judgments about the best means to achieve educational ends should be made by central authorities, who codify these judgments in systems of rules and direct schools to comply with the rules in order to achieve desired ends. Central directives regarding textbooks, course content, school hours, and the allocation of funds among budget categories are examples of Lawrence's rule-based operating environment. Constraints on the school not only protect staff and students' legal rights and ensure the public accountability of the school, but they also specify how school staff are to go about their basic educational mission.

Both teachers and administrators show dissatisfaction at Lawrence about the failure to accomplish that mission. Students, too, recognize that Lawrence is not a successful school. The effects of poor

academic performance and absenteeism pervade the school's environment, and there are no illusions that the school is succeeding. Everyone concerned would like to make Lawrence a better place. Yet staff feel frustrated and sometimes paralyzed by the fact that their ability to bring about change is severely constrained.

Madison

Madison High School exemplifies modest decentralization. In budget matters, personnel, curriculum and instruction, and operations, the locus of decisionmaking authority remains with the district. The focus of site-based management at Madison is school control over an increased discretionary budget constituting about 7 percent of the total budget. The traditional decisionmaking structure inside the school is still in place, with the principal acting as the focal point for decisions. Her consultative style draws on a wider range of staff views than does the more directive style of her counterpart at Lawrence—for instance, by involving faculty in decisions to hire new teachers. Madison has innovated in several areas, such as by acquiring test-scanning equipment to provide information about student performance more quickly and effectively than does the district's central testing office, and by adopting a more thorough planning process. Innovations at Madison have an interstitial character: They have taken place within the confines of the traditional administrative structure, and are chiefly the result of the principal's skill and initiative rather than formal governance reform.

Union

Union High School represents the *avant garde* of public school system decentralization, in the form of school-based decisionmaking. Restructuring of governance at the school and in the district office—with the elimination of many levels of administrative bureaucracy and the shifting of authority over curriculum and school operations to a decisionmaking body within the school—has been as dramatic as anywhere in the United States. Through its SBDM council, Union has not only decentralized decisionmaking from the district level to

the school, but has also adopted the trappings of representative government for making decisions within the school.[1]

Western

Western High School is independent. It can be thought of as highly decentralized in a stylized sense: It faces very few constraints on decisionmaking and has what many advocates of decentralization want more of for public schools—flexibility, initiative, the capacity to change, and the discretion to tailor their services to the needs of students. Decisions about the school environment and the nature of instruction are made by those close to the issues. Responsibility for decisions is not diffused through a multilayered structure but is easily identifiable. Unlike Lawrence, Madison, and, to some extent, Union, staff at Western are not focused on compliance with rules but rather on outcomes. As an English teacher says, "There is no real bureaucratic process" at Western.

The comparison of Western to the public schools is not intended as an endorsement of privatization, nor should the differences between necessary institutional constraints on public schools and the freer operating environment of private organizations be downplayed. Western is not held to the same administrative and financial standards as are public institutions. Because they operate an independent school, decisionmakers at Western have at their disposal instruments that public schools do not: selectivity in who they admit and retain, and an unblinking focus on student performance that would run afoul of due process and other civil-rights standards to which public institutions are held. The discretion that Western's principal has to punish students and to structure behavior would not be acceptable in a public school. Nor would it serve communities well for public schools to expel students for the infractions and academic mediocrity that trigger expulsions from Western. But Western serves as a marker of the far end of a range of systems of constraints on decisionmaking. The comparison with Western sheds light on the degree to which public school decentralization has achieved its goal

[1]As the author has argued elsewhere (Bimber, 1993), the principle of decentralization is distinct from the principle of democratic representation, although the two are often conflated in discussions of school reform.

of relaxing constraints and shifting responsibility for decisionmaking.

FINDINGS

This study began with the hypothesis that decentralization efforts are failing to produce meaningful changes in the nature of decisionmaking at schools. Lawrence, Madison, Union, and Western can be understood to occupy points along a decentralization spectrum, from the highly centralized governance structure to the very decentralized. In other respects, they are quite similar. What does this comparison indicate about the status of decentralization?

Constraints Have Not Been Effectively Relaxed

The case studies support the hypothesis about decentralization's failure to cause change. Evidence from the three public schools shows that there is not much variation in the nature of decisionmaking under different degrees and forms of decentralization at these schools. The stark contrast with the private school emphasizes the similarity in decisionmaking constraints across the traditionally centralized school, the school with site-based management, and the radically decentralized school.

Madison High School's site-based management plan provides a poignant illustration. Its "decentralized" governance structure is nearly indistinguishable from Lawrence's highly centralized system. Small changes in budget authority have done little to change the rule-based operating environment. A decade after decentralization was introduced, the city's school bureaucracy remains as entrenched and, to use the words of one of its administrators, as "dysfunctional" as any. Pre-reform constraints on the use of funds and staff, the choice of textbooks and other instructional materials, and control over school operations are still in place. Decisions about educational goals are made centrally, and systems of rules intended to implement those goals are imposed on the school.

School-based decisionmaking at Union has involved greater change in decisionmaking authority. In certain areas, the school has been given responsibility for designing the means for accomplishing edu-

cational goals. In matters of curriculum and operations, Union has what might be called a contract-based system of governance: The school is held to meeting state-designed educational performance targets but is free to choose its own methods for achieving those targets. The SBDM council has responsibility for choosing those methods. Union's agreement, or "contract," with the district and state stipulates that it will meet goals or face administrative and financial sanctions. Under the agreement, the school has discretion over how to go about its business.

But major portions of decisionmaking are off-limits to Union's elaborate SBDM system. The school faces a very traditional set of constraints on its two most important resources: money and staff. Most budget matters are the responsibility of central office administrators, the superintendent, and the school board, and the majority of personnel decisions are made through centralized labor-management negotiations. There is a disjunction between decisionmaking constraints in different components of the school's governance structure. Governance at Union is therefore best described as a hybrid of centralized and decentralized arrangements.

This finding supports the claim of other researchers that decentralization efforts typically do not change fundamental power relations in school systems (Wohlstetter and Odden, 1992; Hill and Bonan, 1992; David, 1989). At Madison, change has been limited by the very modest scope of decentralization. At Union, change has been much more significant but has still failed to alter centralized patterns of control over budget and personnel.

Different Classes of Decisons Are Inseparable

The fact that constraints on these decentralized schools are incompletely relaxed raises important questions: How much decentralization is enough? To what degree must constraints on schools be relaxed before we can judge the effectiveness of decentralization as a reform? Among educators, discussion of these problems often focuses on the power of teachers relative to that of principals and district offices, and on the clarity of goals and responsibilities in decentralization plans. The comparison of Lawrence, Madison, Union, and Western suggests another dimension to this question. How much decentralization is enough is a function of the scope of deci-

sions included in decentralization and the degree of interdependence of decisions. Many classes of decisions are highly interdependent, and this interdependence limits the effectiveness of fragmented attempts to relax constraints. In each of the public schools, linkages among decisions mean that authority ostensibly given school staff over one class of decisions is effectively limited by constraints on other classes of decisions.

The cases offer many examples of the inseparability of decisions. Union and Madison have authority to select teachers from a limited pool, for example, but not to control the size of their teaching staffs or to provide meaningful incentives for good performance or sanctions for poor teaching. They may change the mix of personnel but may not use financial savings for other needs, however urgent. Under site-based management at Madison, just as under centralized governance at Lawrence, teachers are free to choose teaching methods but not to select textbooks or restructure classes. Like Lawrence, both Madison and Union are given discretion over the use of funds for educational supplies, but may not reallocate funds to or from the other categories that constitute most of the school's budget. At Lawrence, the principal's use of the "discretionary" budget is tightly controlled by central budget administrators. Even Union's adoption of an extra 25-minute period, which involved no funds, no new classes or instructional materials, and no additional staff, was made possible only through a modification in the school's personnel administration system.

The inseparability of decisions that has hampered decentralization at Madison and Union is inherent in institutional action of all types. It can therefore be expected to limit the success of decentralization efforts at any school where reform is focused chiefly on curriculum and instruction to the exclusion of reform of constraints on personnel and budgetary decisions. This study, therefore, suggests a reason why many macrolevel studies have reported that decentralization seems to be "everywhere and nowhere" (Wohlstetter and Odden, 1992): *Decentralization may be commonly undertaken with good intent but in a way that fails to acknowledge linkages among decisions.* Narrowly targeted decentralization appears likely to fail to produce significant changes in the interconnected matrix of decisions that constitutes the governance arrangements of schools. This finding is supportive of the claim made by Wohlstetter and Odden (1992),

David (1989), and others, that changes in authority over budget and personnel should be joined with reform of curriculum and instruction.

To the extent that these four schools' experiences with the interconnectedness of decisions reflect a general, underlying flaw in the idea of governance reform on a limited scope, this finding has implications for the future of the decentralization movement. It suggests that the movement is most likely to succeed by turning in the direction of comprehensive restructuring and charter- or contract-based governance arrangements. School charters, which are gaining momentum as an alternative to now-traditional decentralization and to simple privatization, appear promising chiefly because they relax decisionmaking constraints across most categories of decisions.

Existing School Bureaucracy Fragments Interests and Offers Security

Another issue that emerges from the comparison is, To what extent can fragmentation among the interests of staff impair schools' capacity to change? Mistrust between teachers and administrators runs high, especially in Madison's district, where labor-management relations are terrible even by big-city standards. As a leader of the teachers' union puts it, "There is absolute, total distrust between us and the administration." At Lawrence, the polarization is three-way: Teachers and school-level administrators are mistrustful of one another, and school-level administrators are, in turn, mistrustful of some central office administrators, with whom they constantly struggle over administrative matters, from enrollment estimates to budget requests and teacher assignment.

Mistrust contributes to inaction and a climate of resignation, because it exacerbates the effects of risk-aversion. At these schools, a significant number of teachers object to relaxation of decisionmaking constraints because they fear an advantage accruing to local administrators, with whom they see themselves in a permanent state of struggle over power and turf.

That areas of Union's decentralization plan have met with some successes is due to the willingness of some to bear risks and to the fact that many teachers have left the school out of opposition to change.

Union's large turnover has proven a boon to reform, because the replacements are more accepting of new ways. The departure of critics of reform, along with the superintendent's efforts to "give away power" and the teachers' union's acceptance of a contract-waiver system, has provided an unusual combination of factors conducive to reform. But the attitude of a Madison faculty member is more representative of many teachers I spoke with. He says that he would hate to see more power in the hands of the principal, even though he speaks well of her, because he fears "bias and favoritism" in her handling of decisions. Like many teachers, he feels comfortable with the bureaucracy because of the equity he feels it guarantees. The rule-based system of governance poses no risks to him, whereas freedom from constraints brings uncertainty. He views his own interests and success as a professional as being distinct from those of the principal and, to a degree, from those of the school itself. The governance system has fragmented the interests of members of the organization.

By contrast with the public schools, interests are joined at Western. The comparison is a stark one. Western's principal is more directive than his public school counterparts, teachers' pay is lower and working conditions are poorer, and teachers have no tenure guarantees. Yet teachers and administrators at Western are much more cooperative and trusting of one another than are their public school counterparts. There are few battles between groups over the best interests of students and few accusations of bad faith and misdirected motives. Instead, staff exhibit respect for one another's expertise, even in the face of disagreements over specific decisions.

Western's cooperative spirit has several origins. One is discretion over personnel administration by school officials. Administrators are free to choose faculty who fit the school's needs and style, and, conversely, the school's successes attract staff committed to the school's identity and methods. Employees of Western identify with the school. They view employment as the product of mutual agreement based on merit, rather than as an entitlement or obligation based on experience. Even more important is the sense of mutual dependence on the part of all staff. Teachers and the principal at Western know that they will sink or swim together, because each is dependent on the success of the school for his or her own professional success, and each knows that success is the result of a group effort. Loss of funds,

layoffs, and even closure of the school are real possibilities, as are accolades, increased funds, more staff, and better conditions. Unlike Lawrence and Madison, and to a lesser extent Union, where the tenure, pay, and professional development of each teacher and administrator are largely independent of those of others and the overall success of the school, governance arrangements at Western join the interests of staff rather than fragmenting and insulating them.

The last observation suggests that an important tactic of decentralization might be to create structural remedies for the divisiveness present in so many public schools. Promoting a greater sense of collective commitment and responsibility for corporate success could be accomplished by joining the interests and fates of staff through collective incentives for good performance and sanctions for the opposite. Creating mutual dependence would require a drastic change from the traditional governance arrangements that insulate the interests of teachers and administrators from one another, and may require that schools risk the ultimate sanction—closure—if they do not meet expectations for change.

CONCLUSION

It is too soon to know whether governance changes can be successful at improving school outcomes, but not too soon to see that decentralization efforts can easily fail to produce real changes in governance. There is a disjunction between the principles and the practices of decentralization. The disappointing educational results from decentralization attempts that are reported in the literature and discussed by educators should not be taken as a sign that the principles themselves are flawed. Rather, poor results may reflect only the fact that decentralization efforts have not produced significant changes in constraints on schools—that shifts in decisionmaking authority have been incomplete. What the long-term effects of governance changes on educational outcomes would be remains to be seen.

The fact that many kinds of decisions are interdependent suggests that decentralizing governance changes are best viewed as an all-or-nothing proposition. The experiences of the four schools examined in this study suggest that small or even moderate doses of decentralization are likely to fail to accomplish their goal of relaxing constraints and shifting responsibility to schools. Reform that gives

increases in authority here and there rather than systematically restructuring how decisions are made is less likely to be successful.

To be effective at removing constraints and creating environments in which schools take responsibility for the education process, decentralization should

- be comprehensive across all categories of decisionmaking
- give schools control over staffing and budget, rather than reserving these areas as enclaves of centralized decisionmaking and traditional governance practices
- have funding that is fungible so that schools can shift resources among categories of expense that are now constrained by labor contracts, central offices, and state and federal programs
- put personnel decisions under the control of schools so that the selection, evaluation, and retention of staff reflect decisions about the fit of faculty to the specific needs of the school.

Accomplishing these reforms will require changes in the most fundamental components of school-governance structures, since these components are so closely linked to everything that goes on in schools. Changes in budget, personnel, instruction, and operations should not be viewed as separate foci for reform but as intertwined components of fundamental restructuring.

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